

DAVID SALLE talks to ROBERT ROSENBLUM



ROBERT ROSENBLUM: We should of course begin with the '80s. But I'm interested in what happened to you before the curtain went up.

DAVID SALLE: I came to New York in 1975, after CalArts. I floundered around for a few years, happily. I loved being in New York.

RR: Your signature style is always so clear in the work we know that it's hard to imagine what led up to it. What was it like before 1980?

DS: I had a show at Artists Space, in its original location on Wooster Street, in 1976, when Helene Winer was the director. The pieces were sort of protopaintings, on very large backdrop paper. They were tone poems: a word like *CAMUS*, an abstract paint element, and some drawn or photographic images mixed in—not all that different in spirit from what I found myself doing later, but different in appearance.

I did a couple of installation shows in Holland a bit later. One piece I'm still happy with, at least in memory, as no record of it exists: a large photograph of a race car on one wall, a photograph of an African tribal dancer on the opposite wall, and a row of lightbulbs on the floor that flashed in a random sequence after a piece of music was played. I've forgotten what the music was; very atmospheric, theatrical, and obscure.

I was after a kind of temporal sequence that was supposed to produce a hypnotic rhythm. I still have a very kinesthetic way of reading pictures.

The pieces using theatrical time and space were leading up to a way of working with images in painting. I felt very free to make radical juxtapositions in these staged installation events. I was trying to get that energy into a painting. The first paintings were very modest. The overlapping imagery took hold in 1979, when I had my first show of paintings, in Larry Gagosian's loft on West Broadway. The overlaps were a response to a feeling in the moment. It came all at once while painting—from direct observation, not from art history.

RR: What were the strongest currents in the art world then that you had to either absorb or conquer?

DS: There wasn't then what I imagine had been the case in the '50s, when you would have had de Kooning and everyone had to place themselves in relation to that icon. In retrospect the '70s were a winding down or a vaporizing of a strain of formalism that the New York School had fallen into. Everybody was waiting for Minimalism to die. I wanted

to be a painter and had always identified with the great New York School painters—even though I wasn't held by abstraction. When I came to New York there weren't any left.

The most interesting things were happening in performance, installation, and theater. It was as though art had been emptied out by formalism and we had to go back to the well and see what could be put back in. Godard was bigger than Warhol. One of the most influential and, I thought, terrific artists of that period was Vito Acconci. He was trying to find a voice that could contain all the contradictions, all the cultural influences and desires of life at

that moment. He was putting everything into his work then. The artist as porous membrane through which everything passes but to which some highly refined residue sticks—the problem was to give that a concrete visual form. That is, of course, still the problem.

RR: What group of artists did you feel connected to? Were you more connected to the Pictures artists or the neo-expressionists? What about Julian Schnabel?

DS: I was unconvinced by the Pictures rhetoric. I felt and still feel that Minimalism offered nothing to build on, and I was repelled by its authoritarianism. When you're young, you long to be accepted by a group, but by and large artists are not joiners. It seemed that the Pictures group was defined in terms of what it could *not* do, whereas Julian made a stand for doing whatever the hell he felt like, which is probably a healthier attitude.

RR: Your taste seems to be for art that was traditionally disliked by right-thinking modernists. Your first painting that made me aware of this was one that included Yasuo Kuniyoshi's *Self-Portrait as a Golf Player* [1927], a picture that I had remembered from my childhood visits to the Museum of Modern Art and that had been taken off the walls a long time ago. And then I realized that so much of your work was a conscious rejection of the great MOMA tradition, a fresh effort to look at things from the early twentieth century that had been long neglected, like Walt Kuhn's paintings.

DS: The midwestern town I grew up in had a small museum with a nice little collection of American painting. So the work I came to know firsthand was that of Kuniyoshi and Hartley, Kuhn and Arthur Dove, Sheeler, O'Keeffe, the whole Stieglitz group. I was always attracted to this, for lack of a better term, minority taste. Official art—Minimal art, Conceptual art, and what came to be MOMA art—struck me as being overdetermined. It was so clear how you were supposed to feel that for me it precluded the possibility of actually feeling. By contrast when you came across a film by Samuel Fuller, in which cowboys were talking in a kind

'80s AGAIN GABRIEL OROZCO

I'm not interested in the discussion of identity formulated in the '80s. I'm not interested in postmodernism at all. I'm not interested in those strategies of appropriation. In terms of photography, the dramatization of the self and fetishization of the body? I'm not interested. The use of advertising? I'm not interested. I've always thought that this spectacularization of politics was imposed on the viewer—they screamed at us! The '80s mentality was too conservative, too expressionistic, too self-indulgent, too baroque. I was more concerned with things in the street, in everyday life, in reality. So I was very much an outsider. ■

—AS TOLD TO MARGARET SUNDELL

Opposite page: David Salle, *Galerie Ascan Crone, Hamburg, 1984*. Photo: Benjamin Katz. This page, right: David Salle, *Géricault's Arm, 1985*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 78 x 98". Bottom: David Salle, *View the Author Through Long Telescope, 1981*, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96".

of existential hipster comic-book lingo and the cutting had all the gravity of Eisenstein, you didn't know what the hell to think—whether you were supposed to take it seriously or whether it was a joke, or both at the same time. It just naturally appealed to me. I was for an art that wasn't so overdetermined, that had more of life's contradictions.

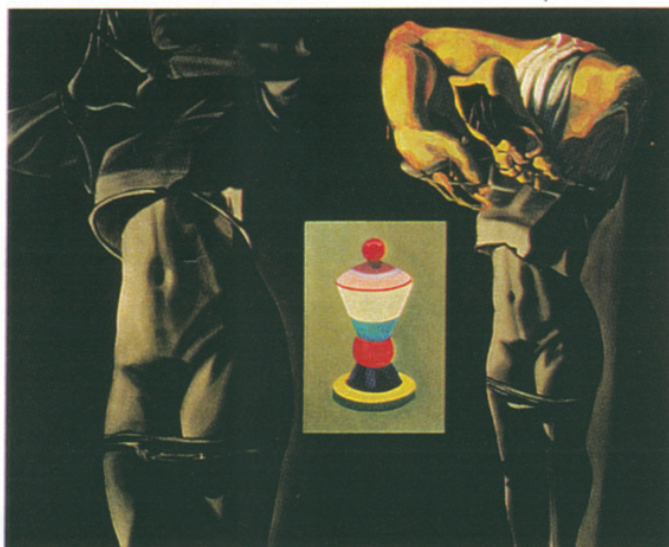
RR: And when I think of your early inspirations, Magritte always turns up. Do you have any thoughts about him?

DS: There was a period of Magritte that really fascinated me, which I think was a clear inspiration—the “*vache*” paintings. I remember meeting David Sylvester when he was working on the Magritte catalogue raisonné to talk about those paintings because they were so little known. You couldn't even find any

those early-'40s Picabias since they were made. It's amazing the way stuff falls through the cracks or, in his case, gets suppressed.

RR: So you were turned on both by the late nudes and by the overlays?

DS: It was mainly the late nudes and Spanish subjects that interested me. They dared you to like them. The overlays were much sweeter, and I didn't get to know them until later. But they already felt old. The kitsch paintings were the closest thing to a Douglas Sirk movie I could



and the psyche. The scale of that accomplishment is what allows that work to seem current and to be used as subject matter in a different context. If the twentieth-century Americans are alienated from everything except nature, the nineteenth-century French are working for a whole culture. I love the audacity of that. On a formal level, I have availed myself of their analytic way of addressing a subject, their spirit of dissection.

RR: But if you juxtapose a head by Géricault with a '50s fabric pattern, it's hard to know where Géricault fits in. It seems to me that they're being equalized.

DS: It's not that they're equal—though they are—but that one needs the other.

RR: It's a question of collision, of what we've talked about before in connection with the Irish poet Paul Muldoon, who loves this kind of unnerving contrast.

DS: He was actually citing Dr. Johnson, who described metaphysical poetry as heterogeneous subjects yoked together through violence. That's my church; sign me up.

RR: When you make a picture in two parts, do you conceive them simultaneously, or do you start with one and then juggle other images against it?

DS: I start with an inability to see things singularly. The idea that you could muster the necessary belief in a mark or a shape to let that be the carrier of all the artistic meaning doesn't work for me. One thing automatically calls up another thing. And then that rhyme calls up a third thing to make a kind of chord. I have a musical analogy in mind.

RR: Your art looks like secondhand imagemaking, like a reproduction of a reproduction. How do you feel about this in terms of, as we put it these days, “our visual culture”? Do you ever paint directly from the model?

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images of them in the monographs. The way those paintings didn't include any instructions about how to look at them was analogous to how I felt about the so-called kitsch paintings of Picabia.

RR: When did you discover later Picabia?

DS: It was in Kasper König's show “*Westkunst*” in 1981. That was probably the first time anyone had seen

imagine. I didn't even know it at the time—in fact, the sources have only recently come to light, but they were painted from movie-publicity and other kinds of photographs, and they both merged with and transcended their model. They were straightforward and hidden at the same time. They were salonist paintings by a guy who'd been kicked out of the salon. On a formal level, they were also quite inventive in terms of presentation—chiaroscuro, juxtaposition, and a self-conscious evocation of mythology and theatricality. They were much more amoral than anything I'd seen in big-league art.

RR: What's the connection between your choices from old-master art—Géricault, Courbet, Caravaggio—and your choices from twentieth-century art?

DS: The older art I'm attracted to has almost the opposite character of the neglected twentieth-century work, namely, moral gravitas and a sense of the painter's role as an intermediary between the culture



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DS: It's a difficult idea to get a hold of, that something, an image, can already be a poetic analogy of itself. If you repaint something, it is a new thing—it's not a reproduction; it's something else. The fragments, wherever they're from, work together like images in a poem, to form a new whole. It's a good question, though: Would the work have been better, deeper, more alive if it hadn't been so involved with existing stuff? It would have been different. Wallace Stevens says that generalizations are of no use to the poet. I think the deadening in art comes from making literal-minded connections between things; that has the same effect of generalization. Literal-mindedness doesn't get you anywhere very interesting. I want to take bigger leaps. Painting, whatever the imagistic source, is about specificity. My pictures are the specific orchestration of all those other things. Actually the figures are painted from my photographs. The assumption that all the images are second-hand isn't really accurate. I do think photography has become a great leveling force. I've tried to use photography to get at a greater particularity—of pose or gesture or light—but now I want to put a cloth over the camera. In any event, I'm working more directly now. The still lifes and flowers are painted from life.

RR: I remember seeing recent works of yours that had a whole new twist, variations, for instance, on strange stone shapes.

DS: A lot of things are coming into play that haven't been there before. But by and large, what I want now is the ability to stage a picture the way one would stage a scene in a film.

RR: And what about making movies?

DS: Ever since I started painting, I have tried to get the fluidity and surprise of image connection, the simultaneity of film montage, into painting. It's that basic alchemy of imagistic syntax—two things in the right sequence make a third thing or, rather, allow the mind to make a new thing. When I did my film, *Search and Destroy* [1995], I wanted to see if I could go in the other direction—get some of the paintings' sensibility into a film. The film did look pretty much like my work. Much earlier, I think some of my best work was done for the stage—the collaborations with Karole Armitage and Richard Foreman. In terms of putting things together to make a stage picture, that felt immediate.

RR: Some of your backdrops, I remember, were single images, like just a dog. These looked like your work but were very different in that the paintings always have more than one thing going on.

DS: Right. But everything inside the proscenium was the stage picture. The backdrop, the single image, was one component. I had the ability in the stage work to make use of duration, of specific viewing time, and of music. In part, the images were a response to the music. In a painting, you have to do it all by yourself.

RR: Do you look at pictures with an eye for what you can cut out and use? Like great quotations?

DS: I just find that certain things move me to action. It's like someone responding to a landscape. Sometimes you go looking for an image the way a writer goes to the thesaurus or the poet to the rhyming dictionary. Sometimes when I see an image I want to liberate the form that is locked up inside it.

RR: Courbet is the artist who comes up most often in connection with your female nudes, works that have so often offended people for their political incorrectness. Is he the artist you first tuned in to for representations of naked women?

DS: My feeling for Courbet comes from seeing the big "machine" paintings, which, along with Géricault, rhymed

with the big feeling and the heroic scale of New York School painting. That had always been the compass point. What I wanted to do was to make a painting with that kind of energy, scale, and all-over composition, but using images. In a sense that's what the giant Courbet and Géricault machine paintings do.

RR: By now I think every discussion of your work has included the notorious Courbet beaver shot, *The Origin of the World*. The painting became a cornerstone for new histories of nineteenth-century art, but is that a picture you knew?

DS: I can't remember where I first saw it—but I didn't know the picture early on.

RR: What about the many angry feminist responses to your work?

DS: I think it is a predictable "shoot the messenger" type of misreading. I don't think my work endorses male dominance in any way. To quote Angela Carter's great book *The Sadeian Woman*, "A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh." Anyway, I'm making paintings, and you objectify in a particular way whatever you paint. That's the nature of it; to paint something is to *scrutinize* in a way that can sometimes be uncomfortable. You have to work out of your actual moment, not an idealized one.

RR: It's no different from the way people are offended by Renoir's women. There's a long tradition of male artists rendering women, especially naked women, this way. So you're just part of that legacy.

DS: Renoir is an artist I can't stand, but he was of great use to both Magritte and de Chirico, two artists I love. It's interesting how a bad artist can influence a good one, but that's another conversation. □

Robert Rosenblum, a contributing editor of *Artforum*, is professor of fine art at New York University and a curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.